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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000904

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/03/15

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SUBJECT: Russia's Missing Ambassador and the Sorry State of Union

Refs: (A) Minsk 312, (B) 04 Minsk 985, (C) Minsk 499

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Russia's newly appointed Ambassador to Belarus, and former Saratov governor, Dmitriy Ayatskov's arrival to assume his post has been delayed "indefinitely." Minsk has linked this delay to indelicate remarks Ayatskov made critical of Lukashenko, although the Russian MFA claims he remains in Moscow because of the lack of progress on the Union State. Recent weeks witnessed a flurry of activity regarding the Union State, culminating in Lukashenko's surprise visit to Moscow. It appears Lukashenko's reluctance to accede to Russian demands may be behind the contretemps. Now, after the recent withdrawal of the Polish Ambassador, Belarus' relations with both its eastern and western neighbors remain cloudy. End summary.

Where's that Ambassador, with his "Bizarre Comments"?

12. (SBU) Incoming Russian Ambassador and former Saratov Governor Dmitriy Ayatskov is missing in action. His predecessor, Ambassador Blokhin, departed Minsk July 8. Ayatskov was originally scheduled to arrive in Minsk the week of July 11, but on July 13 the Russian MFA announced his arrival had been delayed until sometime "in the near future." No reason was given for the delay.

13. (SBU) Ayatskov held a press conference in Saratov on July 19 where he stressed President Putin had given him the task of accelerating the Russian-Belarusian Union. Predicting success in unification, he announced, "I would like and I will surely be the last Ambassador of Russia to Belarus." Ayatskov added it would be difficult to persuade Lukashenko to agree to full union, "Although difficult, my mission is possible... It is very difficult to persuade Lukashenko to change his mind. He firmly plants his feet. Of course, he needs to change his perception of Russia and Belarus as separate countries, and of Putin and Lukashenko as leaders of separate countries. In no case should he put on airs. I will not be his errand boy just because he has worked there for a long time." Ayatskov further predicted Belarus would adopt the Russian ruble in 2006, a long delayed initial step to further unification.

14. (C) Official Minsk was not happy with Ayatskov's remarks. Lukashenko, during his annual three-hour televised harangue on the harvest, commented, "You must have heard the speech of the future, or possibly not future, Russian Ambassador in Belarus Dmitriy Ayatskov and his bizarre statements. We are studying them." In another presentation, Lukashenko called the comments "extravagant"

and accused Russia of trying to pressure him before his July 20 meeting with Putin. Belarus' MFA maintained, "Russian TV channels highlighted an interview with Ayatskov, which quite surprised us. His allegations do not correspond to the warm and friendly way in which relations between our countries are developing." The MFA's spokesman added, "I don't remember anyone speaking like this before the presentation of credentials."

¶5. (SBU) No one seems to know when Ayatskov will arrive in Minsk. Various sources told the press he would be arriving on July 27 by plane. When he failed to appear, the Belarusian MFA announced he would fly in July 28. Again, Ayatskov was a no show. Moscow sources then told the press he would take the night train to Minsk, arriving July 29. A crowd of journalists went to the train station, but the conductor told them Ayatskov had purchased a ticket but not gotten on the train.

¶6. (SBU) On July 29 the GOR announced Ayatskov's arrival was being delayed indefinitely. When asked by the press if this delay was related to Ayatskov's comments, Russia's MFA replied, "His press conference attracted attention and resonated with the press. However, [the delay] is because of other issues. It is about the need for additional deeper consideration of a number of relevant matters concerning the current and future tasks of building the union state and integration cooperation between our two countries." On July 29 the Russian Embassy in Minsk added the wrinkle that Ayatskov's arrival will depend on the date the GOB agrees to accept his credentials. However, the Embassy admitted it is currently not talking with the Belarusian MFA on setting a date as the Belarusian Foreign Minister is on vacation until mid-August.

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Is it Linked to No Progress on Union?

¶7. (C) Another disagreement on the Union State appears to be brewing. In recent weeks Russian officials have made several comments supporting further unification of Belarus and Russia and questioning Lukashenko's interest in union. Minsk has replied by giving lip service to union but also insisting on improbable demands, such as holding public referendum in both states on a Constitutional Act.

¶8. (C) For the past few years Russia has been pushing for Belarus to adopt the Russian ruble, while Minsk has been throwing out unrealistic preconditions (ref C) and delaying the process. In April Minsk's National Bank said the latest target date, January 2006, could not be met. On July 19 Russia's First Vice Speaker of the Duma, Lyubov Sliska, replied, "I would very much like to ask a question of Mr. Lukashenko. Aleksandr Grigoryevich, when will we have a true Union State? How long will you continue delaying the adoption of the Russian ruble?"

¶9. (SBU) On July 20, the day Putin and Lukashenko met outside Moscow, a Russian MFA spokesman said development of the Union State is a top priority for Russian-Belarusian relations. The spokesman listed a number of Union State agreements Russia expected to be signed soon, and added, "We may say without exaggeration the relationship between the two countries has been developing at a growing pace." Putin told the press July 27, "The formation of a union with Belarus depends on Belarus alone."

¶10. (C) Belarus, while giving lip service to greater union, is openly hesitant (ref B). One common Belarusian delaying tactic is to insist on full equality between Russia and Belarus in the union, something Putin has publicly rejected. On July 2 Lukashenko told a Russian TV journalist he supports the Union State, "We will surely be

together and now is the moment our generation can do this. Let us make this move." However, "The parties of this state alliance should enjoy equal rights... The Russian political elite should admit it would have to compete with Belarus' elite, which is smaller, but more honest, purposeful, and as educated as yours. But I see the Russian elite are not ready for that... Belarus is perplexed that Russia violates the clauses of the Union Treaty... Now they stray from the Union construction plan and put forward the inadmissible initiative, the introduction of the common currency. This should be the ultimate result of union construction."

¶11. (C) Commenting July 26 as to whether Putin offered him any personal guarantees in exchange for Belarus joining the Union State, Lukashenko replied, "This has never been a matter of discussion and never will be. We will not give our land to anyone. We do not trade in sovereignty. This is impossible, I have repeatedly said that." [Note: Last year Lukashenko said Russia would gain another Chechnya if it attempted to incorporate Belarus.] Lukashenko supporter and Secretary of State for the Union State Pavel Borodin told the press July 18 that Belarus was responsible for no progress being made on ownership of Union State property. However, Borodin blamed this on presidential aides working against Lukashenko's express orders [comment: highly unlikely in Lukashenko's Belarus].

¶12. (C) Meanwhile Belarusian officials seem to still be using the pretext of needing to draft a Constitutional Act before the Union State can progress. This act, which Belarus insists would have to pass popular referendums in both countries, would change the Russian and Belarusian constitutions to allow their merger. GOB officials, including Lukashenko, reiterated several times in July that Russia and Belarus have not yet agreed on a Constitutional Act, so the Union State will not be possible in the near future. [Note: Before this flurry of attention in July, we do not recall the last time GOB officials discussed the Constitutional Act in such detail.] Lukashenko's spokesperson and Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Natalia Petkevich stated on July 11, "Our aspiration for union progress is visible in all our actions. Yet there is no Constitutional Act, so we have no grounds for speaking about the referendum."

Its all about Union

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¶13. (C) Comment: Despite the GOB's talk about welcoming union, their actions say otherwise. Ayatskov's only "crime" was in openly stating his job is to promote union, and in identifying Belarus as the obstructionist party (although he was indelicate in his phrasing). For this, Lukashenko and the GOB lashed out at Ayatskov and are openly hinting he may not be welcome in Minsk. Moscow and Minsk appear ever more distant in reaching agreement on the union they both claim to want. Russia may have thought, with Belarus under siege from the West, that Lukashenko could be forced to an union agreement on Russia's terms as Russia remains his only friend in the region. But all's fair in love and war, and Lukashenko has shown once again his ability to thwart Russian efforts -- but a major question remains, how long will Russia's patience last?

¶14. (C) Comment cont'd: The GOR announced Ayatskov's arrival would be delayed a full week before he made his comments on union. The GOR subsequently insisted Ayatskov is in Moscow discussing how to promote the Union State, a Russian priority. Lukashenko is already dragging his heels on adopting the Russian ruble, and appears in no hurry to surrender his country to Russia (as an equal union with Russia is highly improbable). As a result, Russia's

Ambassador to Minsk remains in Moscow. Following Poland's recent withdrawal of its Ambassador from Minsk, Belarus' two most important neighbors to the east and west are without ambassadors in Minsk, further clouding Belarus' international relations under the mercurial Lukashenko.

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